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School security problems and the ways of tackling them

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Abstract

As open systems, the schools have been deeply affected by the economical, political, and social conditions of our time, and have been exposed to many undesirable events and behaviors such as substance addiction, violence, child abuse, sabotage, and the like. To tackle the security problems at schools, it is an asset to diagnose the problems at the first hand and then to search the system wide solutions. Based on the views of the teachers, and managers, this research was done to determine the security problems experienced at schools; and to develop recommendations for tackling them. Three secondary schools, characterized with the most severe security problems, were taken into the research coverage; and 22 people were interviewed by asking open ended questions. The data were analyzed by qualitative techniques. The obtained results revealed that there were various problem sources threatening school security; the school policies and decisions were insufficient; and the school support services were not sufficient and effective as well. Concomitant with the results. Some recommendations such as working collaboratively with the public and private institutions; developing emergency plans; training of the academic staff and the personnel were made.

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1. Introduction

While schools are thriving to meet the educational needs of the pupils and of the community as a whole, they themselves, as open systems, are open to every kind of security threats coming from inside and outside of the school environment. Due to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of our time, various individual or group threats may be consciously or unconsciously exerted on schools. Schools may also be exposed to pandemic diseases, fires, and many natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, and so on. And the school management, together with the school community, has to be prepared for all of these kinds of threats, and have to develop strategies to deal adequately with them.

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Since the threats to school security may stem from various sources in the society, the school safety issues should comprise a wide range of bodies such as educators, student, managers, parents, law enforcement agencies, health institutions, businesses, and the like. And, schools, which accommodate so many students, teachers, managers and other supportive individuals, are compelled to provide safe working conditions for staff and for the students. The schools can ensure safe environment by focusing prevention, intervention and response phases in their safety efforts. To deal effectively with the antisocial and crime behavior, schools should promote positive school climate and school-wide effective prevention and intervention strategies (Schneider, 2008, p.11).

1.1. School security problems

In recent years, schools had witnessed various high-profile attacks in many countries. In USA Oregon (1998), Colorado (2006), Visconsin (2006), Pennsylvania (2006) (Schneider, 2008); in Russia, Beslan (2004) (Fairburn and Grossman, 2006); in Finland, Tuusula (2007) (Telegraph, Sept., 2008), Azerbaijan, Baku (2009) (msnbc, April 30, 2009). And in Turkey, it is recorded that there is an escalation in the attacks towards students, teacher, managers in recent years. Some of these attacks were resulted with severe wounds and even deaths. Beside these, theft, robbery, bullying, destroying the school goods are widely seen events and the school management generally is not successful in dealing problems (Republic, 29 Oct., 2004; Geyin, 2007; Ozer, 2006; Erbug and Demirkan, 1998;). Another issue related to school security is that, the schools are not well prepared for preventing and intervening security problems (Geyin, 2007; Oncu, 2007; Donmez and Guven, 2002).

The physical structure of the schools is also a crucial issue when the severe earthquakes are considered. In Turkey the Elementary school of Celtiksuyu was collapsed in Bingol earthquake and 85 students and a teacher died and several others left dead in various schools. In Konya, the Boarding School for Girls collapsed and 17 student died and 27 others were wounded. Izmit and Adapazari earthquakes were also caused several losses. In China, in Sichuan earthquake (13 May 2008) over 4.700 children buried under the collapsed buildings (Rutstein, 2008).

1.2. The aim of the research

Based on the views of the teachers, and managers, this research was done to determine the security problems experienced at three secondary schools in which according to Directorship of National Education records, the most security problems are witnessed in 2008-2009 educational year in Elazig; and to develop recommendations for tackling the security problems.

2. School security

A safe and healthy school environment is seen critical to education. However, various studies in recent years have shown that the schools are not so safe for the students and for the school personnel any more due to some problems threatening school security. Montee (2008), receiving attention to the responsibility of schools for providing a safe environment so that students and teachers maximize the education experience, states that schools are faced with numerous issues involving school safety. From preparing for natural disasters to preventing school violence and protecting students from illnesses, school administrators are seen responsible for ensuring that students are safe at schools.

Related to assurance of security at schools lots of researchers emphasize the uniqueness of each school in dealing with the security problems. Each school has its own characteristics and security problems and specific handling strategies. Similarly, Scheneder (2008, p. 4) states that there is no simple solution to school safety. Every campus has a unique mix of architecture, community characteristics, and funding to consider.

Because of recent violent crimes, natural disasters, and other crises, higher education institutions also convene committees and task forces to reexamine or conduct a comprehensive review of policies, procedures, and systems related to campus safety and security (US Department of Education, 2009).

Mitigating hazards in schools, some strategies are offered (Sahneider, 2008) These are summarized as:

- Creating school wide prevention and intervention strategies
- School policies and legal issues supporting safe schools

- Ensuring quality school facilities and security technologies
- Fostering school, family and community involvement

Creating cultures and climates of safety is seen essential for preventing violence in schools. Major components of creating a culture of safety are states as following (Fein, et al. May 2002):

- Assess the school's emotional climate
- Emphasize the importance of listening the persons
- Take a strong, but caring stance against the code of silence
- Work actively to change the perception that talking to an adult about a student contemplating violence is considered "snitching."
- Find ways to stop bullying.
- Empower students by involving them in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect.
- Ensure that every student feels that he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school.
- Create mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.
- Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones.
- Emphasize an integrated systems model (pp. 69-70).

3. Methodology

According to the records of National Education Directorate in Elazig, the three secondary schools which are characterized with security problems, were taken into the research coverage; and 8 managers and 14 teacher, as total 22 persons were interviewed by asking open ended questions. The views of the subjects were received along with the security related issues such as *security problem sources*, *witnessed events threatening school security*, *school policies and decisions* and *school support services*. The data were analyzed by qualitative techniques. The responses of the subjects were analyzed and according to the main problem areas, the themes were determined related to school security issues. Then, the themes were listed by frequency and percentage rates in the tables.

4. Findings and interpretations

The responses of the managers and teachers were analyzed according to the main security problem areas such as *security problem sources*, *witnessed events threatening school security*, *school policies and decisions* and *school support services*. The mutual themes determined around these areas, were given below in the tables.

3.1 Main problem sources in school security

The responses for the question related to the main problem sources in school security have been given below (Table 1). According to the views of the managers (88%) and teachers (79%) the first prominent problem source threatening the school security is the "lack of family interest". The percent rates indicate that the second most responded problem source for managers (75%) and teachers (79%) is "inadequate physical conditions". Even if some respondents have found physical conditions sufficient, they have stated some concerns. For instance, although there is a camera outside of the school building, it is not convenient for the night vision; there is a surrounding wall but it is not enough tall, etc. While, "disruptive school environment" is thirdly most responded problem source for teachers (78%), it takes the fourth row in managers' responses (50%), after "disinterestedness of teachers and other personnel" problem source. "Social and cultural structure" is pointed out by half of the managers and teachers. Other problematic issues such as "school management style", "educational curriculum", "teacher-student relationship", "lack of cooperation between school and other organizations", and "negative impact of media" come after the above cited problem sources in decreased percentage rates.

Table 1. According to the views of respondents, distribution of the main problem sources about school security

Views of Managers	<i>f</i>	%	Views of Teachers	<i>f</i>	%
Lack of family interest	7	88	Lack of family interest	11	79
Physical inadequacy	6	75	Physical inadequacy	11	79
Disruptive school environment	4	50	Disruptive school environment	11	78
Inefficient educational legislations and regulations	3	38	Inefficient educational legislations and regulations	8	57
Disinterestedness of teachers and other personnel	5	63	Disinterestedness of teachers and other personnel	6	43
Social and cultural structure	4	50	Social and cultural structure	7	50
School management style	1	12	School management style	6	43
Educational curriculum	2	25	Educational curriculum	4	29
Teacher-Student relationship	2	25	Teacher-Student relationship	1	7
Lack of cooperation between school and other organizations	1	12	Negative impact of media	2	14

3.2 Witnessed events threatening school security

Related to the question of what kind of events have been witnessed regarding school security problems, the responses of managers and teachers generally meet in similar issues (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the views of managers and teachers views regarding the witnessed events of security problems

Views of Managers	<i>f</i>	%	Views of Teachers	<i>f</i>	%
Quarrels inside and outside of school	6	75	Disruptive events occurred outside of school	8	57
Insulting and threatening behaviors of students towards teachers	1	12	Insulting and threatening behaviors of students towards teachers	3	21
No problematic event	1	12	No problematic event	2	14
			Student suicide	1	7.1

Most of the managers (75%) have pointed out the quarrels happened outside of the school. And similarly, most of the teachers (57%) have shared this view by indicating disruptive events occurred outside of the school. The second most articulated threatening event by managers (12.5%) and teachers (21.3%) is insulting and threatening behaviors of students towards teachers. And only one teacher has taken attention to the student suicide. On the other hand, some of the managers (12.5%) and teachers (14.2%) have notified no problematic event. This manner of may be related to the concerns about school image. They may feel anxiety of damaging school image.

3.3 School policies and decisions

The distribution of the views of the respondents related to the school policy and decisions about the school security is given below (Table 3). Related to the question whether there is an emergency action plan, all of the responses indicate that there is no action plan. However, some of the respondents have stated that they have some information about the presence of some plans related to earthquake, civil protection, and fire. But they have not been aware of the details and have not participated in the training activities. This situation indicates that the managers and teachers do not seriously deal with the emergency action plans related to school security.

The views of both managers (75%) and teachers (93%) also indicate that there is no emergency communication line at schools. Most of the managers (75%) and teachers (79%) are not contented with the present legislation and regulations. Most of the respondents have conferred that students have not take place in problem solving process; and the personnel have not been trained. Social and sports activities are not sufficient. But the cooperation with the society (families, security and health organizations, civil society organizations) has been generally found sufficient by both managers and teachers.

Table 3. Distribution of the views of respondents related to policies and decisions about school security

Managers					Teachers				

6. Results and recommendations

The analysis of the views of respondents as managers and teachers, related to the security problems at schools, reveal that there are serious security gaps and problems at schools. Another attention drawn point is that the managers and teachers generally share mutual concerns and thoughts related to school security problems.

Related to the problem sources in school security, the first most articulated issue is lack of family interest. Physical inadequacy, disruptive school environment are indicated by more than half of the respondents. Inefficient educational legislations and regulations, disinterestedness of teachers and other personnel, social and cultural environment are the other problem sources indicated by half or nearly half of the respondents. School management style, educational curriculum, teacher-student relationship, media, and cooperation with the other organizations are other problem sources articulated less than half of the respondents. These results have indicated that, there are various and serious problem sources threatening school security at the schools.

Regarding the witnessed events threatening school security, it can be seen that few events have been stated on the contrary of articulated so many problem sources. It is thought that managers and teachers are timid in stating all the witnessed events, perhaps with the fear of damaging their schools images. Quarrels and disruptive events outside and inside schools, insulting and threatening student behaviors towards teachers and a student suicide have been declared as the witnessed security problems by the respondents.

On the other hand related to school policy decisions, it may easily be seen that many necessary threat prevention and mitigation policies and decisions have not sufficiently been put into practice. For instance, the schools do not have any emergency action plans, emergency communication lines. Most of the respondents have complained about inadequate legislations and regulations related to school security. Students have not participated in problem solving process, even if they generally play a central role in the security issues. Social and sports activities have been realized sufficiently. Training about security issues has been found insufficient as well. Only, cooperation with some social bodies such as families, security and health organizations, have been found sufficient by more than half of the respondents. However, if many crucial matters cited above can not realized sufficiently, then this cooperation with the society can not bare so importance.

The findings related to school support services also do not put forward pleasant results. There is no psychologist at these schools. Even if there is a guidance consultant in each of these three schools, because of the excessive number of students, counseling have not been accomplished effectively. Most of the managers and some of the teachers have pointed out that school bus services, canteens and cafeterias have not been supervised, and there is problem in making the cleaning personnel work. The interesting point is that, the percentage rates of managers stating most of these problems is more than the teachers'. This may be connected with the executive position of the managers.

In the lights of the obtained results, to maintain the security at schools, these recommendations may be made:

- All the schools should develop an emergency action plan taking into consideration the school environment, threatening conditions, and problem sources; and every personnel in the school should know what to do in destructive situations.
- An emergency communication line should be built to communicate with the necessary units and organizations to receive timely support and help in threatening situations.
- All academic staff and personnel should be trained about security issues.
- A close relationship with the families should be built and an awareness about security problems should be developed. The disadvantaged families must be supported in dealing with the pupils.
- In each school a security commission composed of the members of students, parents, media, health and security organizations, etc., should be constituted, and effective policies should be developed cooperatively.
- The legislations and regulations about school security should be reviewed and refined to maintain deterrence for threatening behaviors.
- The number of the guidance specialists at schools should be increased so as to deal adequately with the pupils, and at least one psychologist should be assigned in each school for taking care of students with problematic behaviors.

- The physical conditions of the schools should be renewed. Cameras with night vision should be placed outside and inside of the school buildings. The school garden wall should be heighten enough for preventing dangerous attacks and infiltration of unwanted persons.
- The school environment should be monitored closely and along with the cooperation with the security officials, dangerous events and behaviors of persons should be eliminated.
- The ways of supervising school bus services should be sought and safe and healthy transportations of the students should be assured.
- School cafeterias and canteens should be continuously examined and consuming healthful nutrition should be guaranteed.
- The social and sport activities should be enhanced so as to make the students get benefit from their leisure time and to develop healthful relationships.
- To ensure safe and secure environment, the schools should develop school-wide prevention, intervention and response strategies to deal effectively with the destructive behaviors; and to prevent the hazardous effects of natural disasters.

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